

Jorge Luis Borges

The End

Lying prone, Recabarren half-opened his eyes and saw the slanting rattan ceiling. The thrumming of a guitar reached him from the other room; the invisible instrument was a kind of meager labyrinth infinitely winding and unwinding . . . Little by little he returned to reality, to the daily details which now would never change. He gazed without sorrow at his great useless body, at the poncho of coarse wool wrapped around his legs. Outside, beyond the barred windows, stretched the plain and the afternoon. He had been sleeping, but the sky was still filled with light. Groping about with his left arm, he finally touched a bronze cowbell hanging at the foot of the cot. He banged on it two or three times; from the other side of the door the humble chords continued to reach him. The guitarist was a Negro who had shown up one night to display his pretensions as a singer: he had challenged another stranger to a drawn out contest of singing to guitar accompaniment. Bested, he nevertheless continued to haunt the general store, as if waiting for someone. He passed the hours playing on his guitar, but he no longer ventured to sing. Perhaps his defeat had embittered him. The other customers had grown accustomed to this inoffensive player. Recabarren, the shopowner, would never forget the songs of the guitar contest: the next day, as he adjusted a load of mate upon a mule's back, his right side had suddenly died and he had lost his power of speech. By dint of taking pity on the misfortunes of the heroes of novels we come to take too much pity on our own misfortunes; not so the enduring Recabarren, who accepted his paralysis as he had previously accepted the rude solitude of America. Habituated to living in the present, like the animals, he gazed now at the sky and considered how the crimson circle around the moon presaged rain.

A boy with Indian features (one of his sons, perhaps) half-opened the door. Recabarren asked him with his eyes if there were anyone in the shop. The boy, taciturn, indicated by terse signs that there was no one. (The Negro, of course, did not count.) The prostrate man was left alone. One hand played briefly with the cowbell, as if he were wielding some power.

Beneath the final sun of the day, the plain seemed almost abstract, as if seen in a dream. A point shimmered on the horizon, and then grew until it became a horseman, who came, or seemed to come, toward the building. Recabarren saw the wide-brimmed hat, the long dark poncho, the dappled horse, but not the man's face; at length the rider tightened the reins and cut down the gallop, approaching at a trot. Some two hundred yards away, he turned sharply. Recabarren could no longer see him, but he heard him speak, dismount, tie the horse to the paling, and enter the shop with a firm step.

Without raising his eyes from his instrument, where he seemed to be searching for something, the Negro said gently:

"I was sure, senor, that I could count on you."

The other man replied with a harsh voice:

"And I on you, colored man. I made you wait a pack of days, but here I am."

There was a silence. At length the Negro responded:

"I'm getting used to waiting. I've waited seven years."

Without haste the other explained:

"I went longer than seven years without seeing my children. I saw them that day, but I didn't want to seem like a man always fighting."

"I realize that. I understand what you say," said the Negro. "I trust you left them in good health."

The stranger, who had taken a seat at the bar, laughed a deep laugh. He asked for a rum. He drank with relish, but did not drain it down.

"I gave them some good advice," he declared. "That's never amiss, and it doesn't cost anything. I told them, among other things, that one man should not shed another man's blood."

A slow chord preceded the Negro's reply:

"You did well. That way they won't be like us."

"At least they won't be like me," said the stranger. And then he added, as if he were ruminating aloud: "Destiny has made me kill, and now, once more, it has put a knife in my hand."

The Negro, as if he had not heard, observed:

"Autumn is making the days grow shorter."

"The light that's left is enough for me," replied the stranger, getting to his feet.

He stood in front of the Negro and said, with weariness:

"Leave off the guitar. Today there's another kind of counterpoint waiting for you."

The two men walked toward the door. As he went out, the Negro murmured:

"Perhaps this time it will go as hard on me as the first time."

The other answered seriously:

"It didn't go hard on you the first time. What happened was that you were anxious for the second try."

They moved away from the houses for a good bit, walking together. One point on the plain was as good as another, and the moon was shining. Suddenly they looked at each other, halted, and the stranger began taking off his spurs; They already had their ponchos wound around their forearms when the Negro said:

"I want to ask you a favor before we tangle. I want you to put all your guts into this meeting, just as you did seven years ago, when you killed my brother."

Perhaps for the first time in the dialogue, Martin Fierro heard the sound of hate. He felt his blood like a goad. They clashed, and the sharp-edged steel marked the Negro's face.

There is an hour of the afternoon when the plain is on the verge of saying something. It never says it, or perhaps it says it infinitely, or perhaps we do not understand it, or we understand it and it is as untranslatable as music . . . From his cot, Recabarren saw the end. A charge, and the Negro fell back; he lost his footing, feinted toward the other's face, and reached out in a great stab, which penetrated the stranger's chest. Then there was another stab, which the shopowner did not clearly see, and Fierro did not get up. Immobile, the Negro seemed to watch over his enemy's laboring death agony. He wiped his bloodstained knife on the turf and walked back toward the knot of houses slowly, without looking back. His righteous task accomplished, he was nobody. More accurately, he became the stranger: he had no further mission on earth, but he had killed a man.